

OPINION HOME VISITATION: Let's Be Careful Out There

—by Lucy Berliner

Not even the most ardent adherents claim that home visitation itself will be sufficient. As a model it depends heavily on the availability of an array of community services to which families can be referred. Without the additional services, home visitation has little chance of making a significant difference for those families most in need. Even as a long-term strategy to reduce abuse in low risk families, there is not much basis for believing that it would prevent the more serious abuse situations. Arguably, these are the children for whom there should be the greatest concern.

Home visitation programs run the risk of becoming the child abuse fad of the 1990's. In my opinion they are being oversold as the virtual cure-all to the problem of child abuse and neglect. Influential organizations like the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse (NCPCA) have undertaken national campaigns to promote widespread adoption of the model. The U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect has embraced the concept of universal home visitation. State and local communities are clamoring to climb aboard. I am worried that, unless a more measured approach is taken, disillusion will set in and what might be an important contribution will be abandoned for failing to live up to the unrealistic claims which are being made for it.

There are a variety of driving forces behind this movement. One is enthusiasm for a promising intervention. Another is the mediocre record of success of other interventions. Others relate to the political climate. This is an era of reducing expectations for government support of expensive, high intensity programs. The idea of coercive state intervention in family life is increasingly challenged. Home visitation fits nicely with the current zeitgeist; it is universal, voluntary, and — because it occurs before parents are labeled as abusive or neglectful — prophylactic. It is not primarily the province of so-called do-gooder, child saving professionals. Who could be against it?

The lesson of the most recent cure *du jour*, family preservation programs, should alert us to the dangers of overstating the case. These brief, intensive, home-based interventions were hailed as the solution to the problem of out-of-home placement. It now turns out that in a majority of all cases children are not placed, and there are few significant differences in placement rates whether families get the intervention or not (Rossi, 1992). Unfortunately, the sole measure of success, until recently, was avoiding placement. Not only was placement usually regarded as a bad outcome per se, it was argued that there would be savings in foster care, a goal which has not been

realized. Improvement in children's emotional status or in family functioning was only of secondary importance in selling the approach.

In no way am I suggesting that the goal of reducing placement or providing supportive services to families in crisis are bad ideas, or that the programs have no benefit. There are some positive findings, and family preservation programs are increasingly focusing on child and family functioning outcome measures (Pecora, 1993). But when the

data start coming in, professionals are obliged to acknowledge it and respond. We might have been able to respond more constructively to family preservation data if home-based services advocates had not adopted such an ideological tone in addition to promising so much (Nelson, 1990). Far too often these programs were sold by arguing that caseworkers routinely placed children unnecessarily and were not committed to helping families, and by denigrating traditional professional services. This kind of "we care about families and you don't" subtext is revealed by calling a single limited intervention "family preservation," as if the myriad of other professional and non-professional approaches do not share the same goal: helping insure that children live in physically and psychologically safe families, with one or both parents whenever possible.

Any new approach which claims that it will reduce a social problem should be based on empirical knowledge and make a conceptually sound argument for why it might work. The advocates for home visitation have only partially met these requirements. For those cases of child abuse and neglect which may be caused by social isolation, lack of support, inadequate knowledge about child development, and deficits in parenting skills, it holds great promise. But many correlates of child abuse and neglect are not addressed by the approach. What about poverty and its associated features — substandard housing, no job prospects, inadequate health insurance and no day care? Home visitation cannot substitute for economic improvements. What about depression and substance abuse, which are frequently associated with child abuse and neglect? There are effective treatments for these disorders and they are not home visitation. How will home visitation affect those who will commit the more serious forms of physical child abuse which involve extreme, intentional violence and even sadistic acts? And no one has even suggested that it will be useful in preventing sexual abuse.

There is some evidence that certain types of home visitation programs may help reduce rates of child abuse and neglect (Olds & Kitzman, 1990). However, not all home visitation efforts are of equal intensity and quality and therefore produce varied outcomes. For example, a recent follow-up study of a randomized trial of paraprofessional-delivered home visitation services found no differences in rates of child abuse and neglect, nor on any of the other measures of child or parent well-being (Barth, 1992). The author concluded that the intervention was not intensive or specific enough to resolve difficulties within its targeted high risk population. And even when such interventions produce improvements in knowledge and skills, they may not affect the more serious underlying problems, such as insecure attachment, which are widely thought to keep families at high risk for child abuse

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and other negative outcomes (Erickson, Korfmacher & Egeland, in press)

One argument made in support of home visitation is the relatively moderate success of interventions with high risk and child-abusing parents (Cohn & Daro, 1988). However, in many programs the interventions which were evaluated were of low magnitude and found to be more effective with low risk cases. Most authorities agree that certain types of abuse situations or characteristics of families decrease the likelihood of supportive/educational approaches working (see e.g., Wolfe, 1991). Parents with substance abuse disorders, psychopathology or criminality, and longstanding disturbances in functioning do not comply well with intervention efforts or succeed as often.

Not even the most ardent adherents claim that home visitation itself will be sufficient. As a model it depends heavily on the availability of an array of community services to which families can be referred. Without the additional services, home visitation has little chance of making a significant difference for those families most in need. Even as a long-term strategy to reduce abuse in low risk families, there is not much basis for believing that it would prevent the more serious abuse situations. Arguably, these are the children for whom there should be the greatest concern.

There is general consensus that policy recommendations on child abuse and neglect should call for a comprehensive response which respects the contributions of different types of interventions. NCPA and the U.S. Advisory Board strongly support a continuum of services. However, it is tempting, especially on the community level, to take the "do this instead of that" approach. Substituting one intervention for another brings attention to a new program, capitalizes on frustration with the limited success of other single interventions, and appeals to fickle government and private sources of funds which want a quick

bang for a buck. There is no question that one result of this "substitute" mindset has been a certain amount of jumping on the nationwide home visitation bandwagon.

The problem with this effort in many communities is that these are times of cutbacks and downsizing in government and its support for social services. Everywhere, professionals and citizen groups are struggling just to maintain current programs. Advocates of home visitation programs will lose valuable allies among other child abuse professionals if they end up fighting over the same small pie. Not only other prevention programs, but treat-

ment programs risk losing scarce funding to home visitation. It should not surprise anyone to find fairly serious resistance to this prospect.

One of the great fears of those of us who work with already abused children is that the shift of attention toward early intervention will result in erosions of the incremental advances in recent years toward recognizing the value of intervention with the children (Graziano & Mills, 1992). The lure of a prevention approach is strong, for obvious reasons. But no prevention strategy is going to eliminate child abuse and neglect. The causes of abuse in any given case are the result of a particular mix of societal, environmental and individual variables. Now that the public finally cares about abused and neglected children, government and private sources of funding should do what it takes to help them recover, and whenever possible help their parents as well. One important reason why so many intervention approaches have not had great success is because they have never been fully implemented. It takes time and resources to develop effective treatment services. Strategies and approaches must be tested and refined; programs must establish a track record. Treating those already maltreated and maltreating will cost a lot more money per case than providing home visitation to all new parents. These efforts are undermined or short circuited if funding sources prematurely or capriciously shift support with the blowing of political winds.

Giving up on trying to make a difference for the already damaged is dangerous and wrong. Unfortunately, it is all too common to hear social service and criminal justice professionals suggest that it is too late to even try with certain groups. For example, many community planners argue that services should be targeted only to the offspring of teenage mothers because there is little hope of significantly improving the functioning and prospects of the mothers — most of whom are abuse victims. There is no question that it is harder and more expensive to intervene later when problems are more ingrained, but it is still the right thing to do.

Proponents of new programs which will compete with the existing resources allocated for child abuse prevention and intervention have some obligation to consider the impact of their efforts. At the same time, established programs and funding sources cannot shut the door to new ideas and approaches. Communities can use various strategies to insure that one kind of service is not simply sacrificed for another. Legislators and local government officials are fond of saying to social service providers, "Don't just tell us to give you more money, tell us where to get it or who shouldn't get it." The cooperation we need requires the willingness to think more about the big picture and to be willing to sacrifice some of what we want.

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Perhaps the most important contribution of current interest in home visitation programs is the implicit recognition that providing social supports for new parents is a legitimate government activity. To ensure that this contribution is not made to the detriment of other prevention and treatment programs, other government and private organizations concerned with children and families' health and welfare should be enlisted in a broad social response designed to improve the lives of children.

STATE CHAPTER NEWS

—by Claudia Soldano

Chapter Development

As 1993 draws to a close, we have an opportunity to review our goals and accomplishments. One of the more ambitious of APSAC's initiatives was the establishment of a successful chapter in every state by the year 2000, to address the local needs of our growing membership. Much of 1993 was spent working on the first step of this process: organizing the environment in which chapters operate. We gained the assistance of a *pro bono* attorney to sort out the legalities of the chapter-national relationship. A committee of experienced chapter organizers was formed to focus on state chapter development. Last, but by no means least, a full time staff person was hired to carry out the day to day operations of chapter relations.

Part of our goal is to keep chapters as independent as possible as they work toward APSAC's goals. To help with this, we are providing the necessary legal assistance for chapters to become independently incorporated and to gain non-profit status. This will allow chapters to be candidates for grants, federal and state tax exemptions, and tax-deductible donations.

The state chapter committee is charged with the responsibility of directing the environment in which chapters form, operate, and grow. All committee members have been part of organizing APSAC chapters, so they know of what they speak. Under their guidance, a variety of tools are being put in place to help groups with the organizational challenges of a chapter. Training materials on forming a chapter, establishing a committee system, and planning educational meetings have already been distributed to chapter coordinators and officers, and more materials are under preparation.

Having a staff director for state chapter development gives chapter organizers a central source for information and inspiration. Much of my time is

spent finding out about the latest chapter needs and achievements and developing ways for the national to assist chapters. While I have met most of the chapter coordinators and officers by phone, I hope to meet all of them, along with other APSAC members, face-to-face at the Annual Meeting in San Diego in January or the Colloquium in Boston in May.

How do We Spell Success?

APSAC began 1993 with thirteen chartered chapters and many in the process of forming. We can now boast of twenty chartered chapters and active formation of at least eleven others. (Readers in Alaska, the District of Columbia, Louisiana, Nevada, New Jersey, North Dakota, South Dakota, West Virginia, and Wyoming: there's no chapter or identified coordinator in your state yet. If you are interested in forming a chapter, please call!) Obviously, the raw number of chapters listed play a part in reaching APSAC's goal of having a successful chapter in every state by the year 2000. But what are the other measures of "success"? The State Chapter Development and Oversight Committee outlined the criteria to define a successful chapter.

- A healthy percentage of APSAC members in the state are active in the chapter.
- The chapter's membership is large and diverse along disciplinary, racial, ethnic, and geographic lines.
- The chapter communicates regularly with its members.
- Active committees and task forces are producing measurable results.
- An annual meeting with program content is held.
- The chapter communicates regularly with APSAC's national office and Board.
- Chapter officers participate in organizational development training offered by the national office.

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A special welcome to all of our new CAPSAC members. Late this summer, the Boards of CAPSAC and APSAC agreed to merge the two organizations, which had been developing on parallel paths for many years. CAPSAC is now an affiliated chapter of APSAC. Congratulations!

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